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ABSTRACT

The developmental stages of writing can be related to Jean Piaget's final three stages of development (preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational) and to the narrative, descriptive, explanative, analytical, and artistic rhetorical modes. As the child enters kindergarten or the first grade, narrative blooms. By this age most young children operate concretely and they sense order and patterns that govern all of life. Likewise, the verbal life of the child has taken on a sense of rule and sequence. In entering the school world of writing, the child turns to the most fundamentally structured mode of discourse, the story. When full control--what Piaget calls decalage--is established, students are ready to move into the descriptive mode of discourse. The cognitive demands that arise from both ordering the phenomena and sensing completeness separate descriptive writing from the narrative mode. When a single-minded focus upon either time or space is left behind, the writer moves from the fundamental, concrete mode to a sophisticated, formal mode of writing. This movement is the requirement for the explanative mode where time and space must be blended by the writer. The analytic mode is even more demanding cognitively in that the writer must fashion abstractions that are drawn from, and point to, the concrete world but are by definition not a part of it. The artistic mode is the final writing stage and requires both a competence with abstractions and the ability to create a concrete embodiment appropriate to the abstraction at hand. To write in this mode is to need to measure even more skillfully than in the lower stages the sense of completion of the art. (HOD)

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WRITING STAGES: A DEVELOPMENTAL HIERARCHY

Joseph O. Milner

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WRITING STAGES: A DEVELOPMENTAL HIERARCHY

Joseph O. Milner

"Developmental" is used so readily by such a host of us as to make it mean almost nothing at all. I intend to use the concept in its strictest sense, as Piaget might have defined it. I want to posit a writing development construct which, like cognitive development upon which it is based, is interactional in nature and features stages that are sequential, hierarchical, and universal. Its interactional quality rests simply on the fact that it sees growth as the interplay between our inherent physiological equipment and our responses to the enviornment. Neither of the two alone can account for the growth process. With regard to the three features of its stages, it is sequential in that one stage emerges from another and in that the order of the sequence is invariant. Although some behaviorists have vigorously attacked this notion, it is generally well accepted among psychologists. It is hierarchical in that the higher stages are more complex and more comprehensive way of viewing reality than the lower. Some feminist psychologists such as Carol Gilligan have challenged this idea because they feel women travel on different developmental paths, but the Piagetian concept still holds sway in the field. It is universal in that all humans given an adequate set of psychological equipment and a fair environment will move through the hierarchy in spite of their particular cultural circumstances. Some anthropologists and cross cultural psychologists have challenged the idea that these stages are a good measure of cognitive development in all parts of the world, but most research still supports this notion as well.

With this two-part definition of development in mind, I want

to rely on Moffett's notion about language, the three-layered construct of conceptualization, verbalization and literacy, to connect cognitive development with writing. I would like to build on his notion that thinking is the base of talk which in turn is the base of writing. If these are indeed naturally,even necessarily connected, then we can see that cognitive structure would lie at the base of writing. A student's conceptual limits or powers would be directly linked to writing predispositions, tendencies, preferences and even capabilities.

I want to suggest, then, stages of writing development which roughly parallel and are related to those Piaget set forth. Since the first stage of cognitive development is language free, the six stages I suggest relate directly only to Piaget's final three stages: pre-operational, concrete operational, and formal operational thought. The writing stages I suggest, moreover, are not given new labels but are tied directly to rhetorical modes which have been used for centuries: narrative, descriptive, explanative, analytical, artistic. Furthermore, the stages I suggest are intended to be comprehensive, to include all the basic modes of writing.

WRITING STAGES		COGNITIVE BASE
EPISODIC	(Random)	PRE-OPERATIONAL
NARRATIVE	(Temporal)	CONCRETE
DESCRIPTIVE	(Spacial)	
EXPLANATIVE	(Temporal-Spacial)	FORMAL
ANALYTIC	(Categorical)	
ARTISTIC	(Categorical-Dramatic)	

The Episodic stage is the first of the hierarchy. Its language reflects a world seen in seemingly disconnected chunks. Much like the early stages of an infant's language acquisition which has been labeled as "pivot-open grammar," it has an internal or covert structure which is hard for the reader to locate. When the 17-month-old utters the phrase "daddy's chair," we are not sure of the child's meaning: whether "this is daddy's chair," "I want to sit in daddy's chair," "why isn't daddy in his chair?", is intended. We are unsure of the deep structure of that surface of words. In written expression the same uncertainty is present for the audience in this initial stage; the structure may exist, but it is hard to decipher. The additional obstruction of spelling, letter formation, spacing and directionality often confounds the reader initially, but the lack of obvious structure is a far deeper and more critical limitation. The story grammar which we know to be a significant feature of reading comprehension seemingly has not yet been solidly formed. The writing is not pure mishmash; it merely fails to reveal its operational structure, if one, in fact, exists. It may well be that the aesthetically beautiful, non-directional writing of young children may be related to the sense of a directional or structural pattern which has not been fully formed within the child. This disordered state generally falls away as the child enters kindergarten or the first grade and a new kind of directional writing appears.

At this stage Narrative blooms; what Mary Ellen Giacobbe calls "bed-to-bed stories" emerge. By this age most young children are concrete operational and sense an order and pattern which govern all of life. Playing baseball or Uno by the rules is

serious business. The younger child who willy-nilly violates those games' sanctions is regarded as a pure menace. Likewise, the verbal life of the child has taken on a sense of rule and sequence which are the basis of most verbal production. In entering the school world of writing, the child turns to this most fundamentally structured mode of discourse, the story. The structure is the most basic one we impose on life - time. All the child must do is recall a sequence of events as it happened earlier. The process, of course, requires selecting and editing, but essentially demands only the ability to reconstruct an order. The child must merely locate a beginning, middle, and end: "Once Upon a Time," "But," and "Happily everafter." No other device is required as the structure of the discourse. This is a comfortable frame for all of us; when close friends gather, we kick off our shoes and begin the ritual of story telling. It is our basic level of language comfort. Unfailingly, when my students reflect on their teaching experiences in our practicum seminar, the analysis which begins the session soon trails off into a story. Donald Graves tells a story about a bright elementary student whose desire to write a paper explaining what he knows about dinosaurs quickly turn into a story about a particular dinosaur. He urges us to recognize that what impels the child to write is that "everybody has a story to tell." Seen from a developmental perspective, this child's shift of mode can better be explained as a retreat from a structure over which he has little control to one in which he feels more certainty.

When full control, what Piaget calls decalage, is established, students are ready to move into the other fundamental, concrete mode of discourse: Description. In the Descriptive mode the task

is more difficult because the structure which is basic here is space, not time. The idea of objects in space seems more concrete than the artificial notion of time, but when organizing space, one can move in endless numbers of directions, and the task involves more than memory. Whether one choses to move from big to little, from near to far, unusual to familiar, or bright to dull, the strategy must be mapped out by the writer. Choice and strategy are necessary. Young students have less practice in imposing this structure on reality, and its multiple variations make this step forward a large one.

In addition, the factor of completion or exhaustion of the subject may enter here as well. The narrator can almost limitlessly shrink the number of events in a story and still capture its essence, but the writer is highly conscious of completing the job of describing the major features of an object. When writing a basic description of an object one has a sense of a commitment to an audience to make it see the object as it is beheld by the writer. This compels the writer to offer up something approximating general completeness. The object begs that it be wholly captured with words. The cognitive demands, then, arising from both ordering the phenomena and sensing completeness separate descriptive writing from the narrative mode.

When a single-minded focus upon either time or space is left behind, the writer moves from the fundamental, concrete mode to a sophisticated, formal mode of writing. Such is the requirement for the Explanative mode where time and space must be blended by the writer. The leap is similar to that used by Henry Margenau to describe a progressively sophisticated understanding of Science.

Such an understanding moves from the fundamentals of the physical world of time and space, which he calls the "p-plane," to sophisticated or secondary concepts like acceleration or force which are more abstract, sophisticated postulates arrived at by combinations of the fundamental elements.

We have in the explanation of a process, thus, a cognitive demand which is clearly more sophisticated than that found when either one of the two basics (time and space) is used alone. The blending removes the fundamental elements of time and space from the very basic position which either occupies alone. The writer is therefore making an initial penetration into the formal or sophisticated level. Some empirical indication that this is, in fact, a higher, more formal level of thought is found in a study of second, fourth, and sixth graders who were asked to play a game whose rules were verbally contradictory. While second graders were basically oblivious to the contradictions in the explanation, sixth graders were able to locate and articulate the problem. Similarly, young writers may balk at this stage if their cognitive equipment or full control of lower modes is not yet developed. They must reach a higher level of cognitive development to be able to write with power and ease at the explanative stage.

The writer, too, feels the pressure of purpose more powerfully than in the lower stages. This leads to the concomitant need to write with completeness. The need to transact with the audience is strong. Though the urgency may only be attached to having to write an explanation so that an apprentice can complete a process, the pressure is indeed real in a way not experienced in the earlier modes. The writer knows full well whether the transaction has been

completed, whether the writing task is finished.

The object or task to be explained, moreover, is not a static thing out there to describe, but an emerging thing which through a sequence of steps comes into being. When a student is asked to offer an apprentice written explanation for using a set of squares to create a design, the plan for how time and space will be harnessed to allow the apprentice to replicate the design must be the creation of the student writer. Even the time sequence (steps "A" through "Z") must be created. No a priori beginning point has been established for the writer. The cognitive demands are great.

The Analytic mode is, of course, even more demanding cognitively in that space and time are not blended at a secondary level but are abandoned altogether. The writer must fashion abstractions that are drawn from, and point to, the concrete world but are by definition not a part of it. This is a formidable task for the writer and a difficult one to accomplish without training or the appropriate cognitive readiness. Such readiness would mean the student's capacity for formal operational thought or proximity to it. Categorization of mutually exclusive and subdivisible points is generally something which is gradually acquired, but it can be nurtured in well crafted activities. Exercises like 5LTV where students rapidly list television shows, lump them together in groups, label the groups, limit or subdivide and restructure the groups, and finally link the abstractions into an array suitable for exposition or argumentation provide that training. To write well in this mode one must also possess maturity in what Robert Selman calls role-taking development. This capacity can also be fostered by exercises so that counter points and arguments can be enumerated and successfully answered. These and other approaches

can be used to prepare students for the difficult task of analytical writing.

At this stage, purpose may seem less certain and the urge for completeness less evident than in explanative writing, but the writer feels a compulsion which is the product of dedication to the idea itself. A writer knows when the exposition is not full, and even more clearly when the argumentation is not effective. The writer is now a teacher rather than master of an apprentice; earnestness about completeness thus arises from within and assessment of that process requires even more cognitive acuity and sensitivity than was needed in those earlier modes.

The Artistic mode is the final writing stage and requires both a competence with abstractions and the ability to create a concrete embodiment appropriate to the abstraction at hand. It is hard to imagine a more complex cognitive structure than that found in King Lear, nor a more subtle means of clothing those abstractions than Shakespeare presents in the action of the play. As Ransom says, the "world's body" is composed of both the skeleton of idea and the flesh of human experience. Both must be handled in order to create art. This stage of writing can look very much like mere time centered narrative, but it is, we know, far more than that. Donald Murray has made this clear by showing that all of the sophisticated tools of his trade are required in this mode of writing. (All of the cognitive skills of the other modes emerge in this one.) It is, as Kettle argues, the fusing of idea and life, the precarious balance of the two. Only Objectivists such as the early William Carlos Williams, the recent Deconstructionists, and

radical New Critics overlook the necessity of including both of these elements in this kind of writing.

To write in this mode, moreover, is to need to measure even more skillfully than in lower stages the sense of completion of the art; the artist is so thoroughly the servant of instinct that intent or purpose is nearly transparent to others while it may seem to be almost unrecognized by its creator. But whatever the artist's state of knowing may be, the drive for completion, for perfection, is tremendous.

Given this progressive hierarchy, these developmental stages of writing, it is important for teachers to consider the role of decalage and disequilibrium in the writer's movement through the six modes. Decalage which in Piaget's construct means control of all the tasks in a stage, is particularly significant because it means that mastery of a mode is important if not essential before a writer moves into the next mode. Graves' dinosaur writer who laid aside description and turned to narration may well have needed to write more stories before he was advanced into the higher mode. And, because each of the cognitive requirements for a given mode is called upon in a new fashion in higher modes, control and comfort in the initial mode is crucial. Even when students have moved through a higher stage and are asked to write in a lower one, a form of decalage is evident. The students' advanced cognitive abilities will often make the writing in that lower mode resemble the structure of a higher one. Mature, formal writers, for example, when asked to describe a sea shell in such a way that it could be located among other nearly identical ones, turned to the analytical mode to establish names for the basic,

regular features of their shell. By such categorizing they were able to accurately communicate the anomalous features of their particular shell. The request for a special description, however, was circumvented; no general picture of its shape was offered. The basic principal of decalage pertains here: writers who are gaining control of a higher mode of discourse will continue to work on the skills entailed even while writing in a lower mode.

A second major pedagogical consideration is the developmental concept of disequilibrium. For Piaget, this meant the unbalanced state in which a mastered stage begins to feel inadequate or insufficient and exploration into the next stage is undertaken. One foot is in one world, the other up in the next. Teachers need to foster an urge for exploration and advancement in writers and help them to use it productively as it occurs naturally. If we allow students to write stories for too short a time (if they don't achieve decalage), they are in trouble, but if they write them everlastingly they are even more greatly disenfranchised. Everyone, it is true, has a story to tell, but there is also a description to write and miles more to go in other modes writing. The two processes should work in productive tension with one another. Students must be allowed time and patience for full decalage but must also be urged into exploration and the challenge of disequilibrium. Without skillful attention to both, growth is less apt to occur.